

### The Free Press Short Story

## Custodian of the Black Box

BY DENNIS H. STOVALL

A FEW minutes before seven, on a frosty Monday morning, Faith Brooks, efficient minister's secretary, arrived at the door of the parson's study at the rear of Holliston Avenue Church. On all other days of the week Miss Brooks did not come on duty until nine; but on Mondays she came before seven, eating her breakfast after her early morning task was done.

She had walked hurriedly from the corner, two blocks away, where she had alighted from the bus. Something in the hushed quietude and peace of the icy-covered church made her lighten her tread. The back vestibule, off of which the pastor's study opened, was dark at this early hour. Faith snapped on a light, and her cold-stiffened fingers fumbled the keys. She finally selected the desired one from the clumsy bunch she carried, and turned the lock.

As she stepped into the room a soft, subdued glow of ruby and orange filtered through the stained-glass windows of the book study. The shelves of books, the deep carpet with its quaint old-rose figures, and the minister's massive oak desk were vaguely revealed.

Faith made a rapid survey of the room, her gaze pausing on the memorandum slip which lay under a brass paper cutter on the polished desk. Always, on Monday morning, she found a slip under the paper cutter, left there by Doctor Samuels the evening before. Monday was the pastor's day of rest. She picked up the slip and held it so that the soft rays from the windows fell upon it, enabling her to read the pencilled notation.

"He who thinks evil, sees evil; He who thinks good, sees good." She folded the paper, slipped it in her coat pocket, and quickly reached beneath a velvet curtain that covered a lower shelf near the door, to bring out a black cardboard box. The box was rather heavy, as it contained the metal letters and numerals used in changing the quotations and announcements on the big bulletin board in front of the church.

This morning the box seemed unusually heavy. Faith had lifted it many times, and was quick to sense the extra weight. Wondering and a bit curious, she set it on the desk and raised the linged cover. She caught her breath and uttered an ejaculation of surprise with her first glimpse. A woman's brown leather bag lay inside the box, on top of the segregated letter cases. It was a framed, old-fashioned bag with a hand-branded strap. When she lifted it out, another ejaculation escaped her lips. The bag was heavy with coins. It contained a large amount of money. Of this Faith Brooks was certain. No doubt other valuables were in it, too; but how came it in the box? Who could have slipped it in here? Was it done for the purpose of temporarily hiding it or for safe-keeping?

She deemed it unlikely that Doctor Samuels put it in the box upon leaving the study at the close of the Sunday evening service. She could not well telephone him to inquire, as it was his wish not to be disturbed at all on Mondays, except in case of sickness or urgent need. Anyway, a locker was provided in the church for all lost and found articles. The janitor had the key and was the custodian of articles left and forgotten in the pews.

The janitor would not come on duty for another hour. Faith decided that she should keep possession of the bag until she could turn it over to him. She could find no identification marks upon examining the purse, but she did not open it. Instead she put it back in the box, and leaving the study door ajar, went out to complete the task which had brought her early to the church. Being an efficient minister's helper, Faith Brooks made sure last week's notices were off the bulletin board by seven o'clock, Monday morning.

She was half way across the frost-laden lawn when her attention was drawn to a police car that rolled quietly along the avenue to pause at the intersection near by. Faith halted and stood motionless while one of the two uniformed men in the car leaned out, to sweep a searching gaze around the church. Her heart pounded excitedly when he looked straight at her. She almost dropped the black box. She wondered had there been a robbery? Suppose it was found in her possession?

She held her breath and waited, fearful and uncertain. In a few seconds, though it seemed much longer to Faith, the car rolled on. Nervously, she set the box on the ground under the bulletin board and carefully removed the letters from the glass-covered frame. The letters she put on their place spelled the words of the quotation on the memorandum slip:

"He who thinks evil, sees evil."

He who thinks good, sees good." Always, on Monday morning, Doctor Samuels had some such striking quotation or a Bible verse for the bulletin board. On Tuesday afternoon the notice for the Wednesday night prayer service would be posted, while on Thursday the sermon titles and program for the next Sunday would be used.

To Faith Brooks on this cold morning came a strange feeling of anxiety, a duty which she so often had performed with no other thought than to be punctual, became genuinely important. She was at a loss to understand this evident change of attitude. Perhaps, she inwardly reasoned, her finding the brown leather bag was the cause.

Her musings terminated abruptly when she re-entered the study. Once more she almost dropped the black box. She stepped back from the door with a startled little cry. A man was in the room, a young man in a gray English topcoat. He had removed his hat and laid it on the desk, exposing his dark curly hair.

"I beg your pardon?" he spoke quietly, in an apologetic tone. "Am sorry if I startled you. I should have made a more formal entrance, but I hardly expected to find the study open so early. I guessed some one was around, possibly the janitor, but let me help you with that box."

He smiled and extended a hand. Faith retreated farther into the vestibule. "No, thank you," she stammered, "it isn't heavy." She wanted to run, or to give an alarm. This well-dressed and good-looking youth, she immediately decided, knew the leather bag was in the box. Her fearful agitation appeared to amuse him.

"Evidently I gave you a dreadful scare. It is dark in here and of course you weren't expecting to find a stranger waiting. Come right in, please! Don't let me drive you away, Miss."

"I'm Faith Brooks, the minister's secretary," she supplied, falteringly, keeping a tight grip on the black box. "And I'm Marshall Frazer," he answered. He moved from the desk, and Faith ventured into the study. She wanted to get nearer the telephone. All manner of conjectures ran riot through her mind, but her main desire was to get the stranger from the office, or to learn his business.

"Did you wish to see Doctor Samuels?" she asked. "He doesn't come to the study on Mondays." "No! I'm not here to see the minister," said the caller. "I'm seeking a lost purse—or bag, that was left in the church last night." The young man spoke in a very matter-of-fact voice; yet Faith Brooks could not suppress her fears. She still believed he was playing a clever ruse of some kind.

"It wasn't my bag that was lost," he told her promptly. "It belonged to a good old lady who attended evening service. I happen to know she lost it or absent-mindedly left it in the church. I'm trying to do her a good turn by retrieving it early this morning."

All this sounded plausible enough, but Faith Brooks realized the danger of releasing the bag to this middle-aged young man. She never had seen him before that she could recall. Her duty was not to reveal the location of the bag unless he could advance a better claim.

The janitor gathers up all lost articles and keeps them in a locker till called for by the owners," she evasively explained. "He won't come to work till eight o'clock."

The visitor muttered an exclamation and looked at his wrist watch. "Almost an hour to wait," he remarked. He gave her another smile. "You're an unusual secretary. Not many of them beat the janitor on such a cold morning."

"I do it only on Mondays," said Faith, hoping he might do his waiting somewhere else.

Apparently he had no such intention. "If you don't mind, he eventually suggested. "I'll light the gas. It's as frigid as an ice house in here." He struck a match and turned on the heater. Faith was afraid he would close the door. She leaned on the desk, clutching the black box, trying to decide what she should do next.

other. She recognized the minister's voice. "Is this you, Miss Brooks?" "Yes—yes—"

"Did you find a woman's brown leather bag?" "Yes—Yes—"

"I was certain you would find it," said the minister in a relieved note. "That's why I left it in the black box. I was the last to leave the church after Sunday evening service. I picked up the bag at the altar when everyone had gone. Let no one have it except the owner, who of course can give a satisfactory description of the Janitor, when he comes on duty." With an obliging "Thank you, Miss Brooks," the minister hung up. Even had he remained at the telephone, Faith could not have told him that a mysterious stranger was waiting a chance to snatch or acquire possession of the bag in some more forceful way.

She was relieved, to see the young man direct his gaze toward the auditorium again. The radiant glory of sunrise now shone on the big memorial window under the alcove. The stranger resumed his monologue. Faith made no attempt to listen, for she was in a mental panic, desperately trying to decide what she should do with the brown bag. So far, she believed Marshall Frazer had not guessed its hiding place. Even while she wrestled with the problem, his low-spoken words registered as distinctly as if he were shouting in her ear: "It's good for a prairie like me to come home again! This 'old church does feel like home."

Footsteps crunched the gravel outside. The young man turned quickly about, facing the door just as figures appeared at the entrance. Faith still holding the black box, saw them come in. One she immediately recognized as the same uniformed officer she had seen in the patrol car. He was assisting a white-haired, little old woman, whose keen eyes twinkled through the silver bows of her spectacles, and whose gaze turned first toward the surprised youth.

"Aunt Jane!" he exclaimed, hurrying toward her. "How did you get home? I intended to save you the worry and trouble of searching for your lost bag. I suppose that's what you're looking for."

"Yes, I'm dreadfully worried about it," the little old woman exclaimed. "Am not sure where I lost it. So I went to the police station, and this gentleman kindly brought me here."

The secretary came into the vestibule, carrying the black box. The woman looked at her and smiled a pleased recognition. "You are Miss Brooks, the minister's assistant?" "Yes, I hope you know if my bag was found last night in the church."

"I've already asked Miss Brooks about it, Auntie," Marshall Frazer interposed. "She says the janitor gathers up all lost articles."

"And the janitor sometimes overlooks things left elsewhere in the church than the pews," Faith remarked, as calmly as she could. "Doctor Samuels found your bag at the altar."

"Exactly as I guessed!" Marshall Frazer declared joyously. "Aunt Jane will be happily surprised when I tell her I attended service last night for the first time in almost four years. I saw her go to the altar and heard her pray. When she discovered her bag was missing, early this morning, I hurried down here to see if I could find it, or if it had been found. Luckily, Miss Brooks was in the study, but she said I would have to wait 'till eight o'clock."

"Miss Brooks, secretary and Minister's assistant, has the lost bag in her possession, with orders from Doctor Samuels to deliver it to the owner," Faith interjected, as she opened the black box and took out the missing brown leather purse. She still lacked the courage to meet those steady eyes. "She is very sorry she wrongly judged your nephew's motives and good intentions. But he was a total stranger."

"Which he would not have been had he been going to church?" Marshall Frazer interrupted. Setting Faith's hand, he took the black box. "Let me put this thing out of sight. You and Aunt Jane are going to have breakfast with me. How about it?"

Faith Brooks, her features radiant, her heart pulsing with a glad new thrill, directed her gaze for a moment on the bag bulletin board visible through the open door. She saw only a portion of the quotation "he who thinks good sees good." She looked straight into Marshall Frazer's strong face now, and said: "I shall be delighted to go with you."

**Scottish Doctor Died in Germany**  
LONDON (CP).—It is reported from Germany through the Swiss Red Cross that Maj. A. Keith Gibson, 48-year-old Scottish doctor, captured at Boulogne, who volunteered to try to help Russian prisoners-of-war suffering from typhus in German camps, died in Germany from the disease and was buried with full military honors.

**BALK THE BEACON**  
LONDON (CP).—Searchlights kept a watch on the sky over central London while firemen extinguished a fire in a builders' warehouse. The fire, visible some distance, might have acted as a beacon for raiders.

## The Week at OTTAWA

Specially Written for The Acton Free Press by BY ALAN HARVEY, Canadian Press Staff Writer

OTTAWA, (CP).—A government bill to provide western farmers with an increase of 20 cents a bushel in the initial price of wheat during the 1942-43 crop year is under discussion in the House of Commons this week.

Temporarily, the measure crowded out of parliamentary debate such topics as post-war rehabilitation, manpower and the long-mooted Alaska highway.

Introduced at the week-end by Trade Minister MacKinnon whose department includes Canadian Wheat Board, the bill raises the payment to the farmer to 90 cents a bushel, basis No. 1 Northern at Fort William. The Commons gave it first reading Friday.

On Monday, Mr. MacKinnon told the House, the increased price will be paid on 280,000,000 bushels, an increase of 50,000,000 bushels over the total being acquired in 1941-42.

The Trade Minister joined with Agriculture Minister Gardiner in unfolding a picture of a wheat and food grains program by which the government intends the wheat surplus shall pay for increased yields still giving assistance to prairie wheat growers who are unable to produce, other things which might yield more profitable returns.

Mr. Gardiner's program included a minimum price of 60 cents a bushel, basis in store Fort William, for Winnipeg barley futures and for all cash barley, basis No. 2 C. W. 6 row; a minimum price for oats of 45 cents a bushel, basis in store Fort William, for Winnipeg oats futures as well as for all cash oats, basis No. 2 C. W.; and a fixed price for flaxseed of \$2.25 a bushel, basis No. 1 C.W. in store Fort William.

Trading in futures and cash flax will be halted on all Canadian markets at a future, unspecified date.

Another important announcement fixed the date of the government's annual plebiscite at April 27. To give members of the House plenty of time to inform their constituents of the measure, the Commons will adjourn for a long Easter recess March 27, re-assembling April 20. In the plebiscite the government seeks release from past pledges respecting the methods of raising men for military service.

Almost simultaneously with the new price announcement, the chairman of the wheat board, George H. McIvor, notified the grain trade through the Winnipeg Grain Exchange that all open wheat futures would be adjusted to the Board's new level of wheat prices on or before July 31 next, end of the present crop year.

Earlier a bill introduced by Agriculture Minister Gardiner paved the way for continuation of payments for western wheat acreage reduction, following the program inaugurated last year. Payments for turning wheat land into summer-fallow will be reduced but there is the same encouragement for increasing production of feed grain.

A third major phase of farm life is known to be subject to government scrutiny: the question of adequately staffing the nation's farms. A special announcement on federal farm labor plans in this respect was expected to be made within the next few weeks.

**Mobilizing Labor**  
Meanwhile, the provision of farm labor was expected to be assisted under one phase of the government's policy for mobilizing available men and women to meet the needs of war.

Under a director of national selective service yet to be named, the mobilization plans were to be in charge of a board representative of all war departments—defence, munitions and supply, labor, agriculture and war services.

Primarily the extended selective service program will be voluntary but officials have said there may be some compulsion in cases, for instance, where an employer refuses to release an employee whose services can be of greater aid to the war effort some where else. Administrative machinery for the mobilization will be the responsibility of the insurance and the approximately two employment agencies across Canada. Youth training centres also will have a part in the scheme.

**Pacific Highway**  
While the House gave first reading to Labor Minister Mitchell's bill providing for construction of a civilian employment of men discharged from the armed forces, Prime Minister Mackenzie King announced that the proposed highway through Canada linking the United States and Alaska will be started at once, with the United States paying for construction costs and wartime upkeep.

The new road will start at Fort St. John in northern British Columbia and follow the general line of the air-ports, which Canada has constructed through Fort Nelson, Watson Lake, Whitehorse, Boundary and Big Delta to Fairbanks, Alaska. Mr. King told the House.

## Old Salts Would Shiver Their Timbers Over Ship's Biscuits of To-day

British seamen compelled to take to their boats no longer have to dig their teeth into the ironed, ship's biscuits of tradition. Instead they are given dainty little wheatmeal biscuits, about 2 inches square and a quarter inch thick.

Packed in rust-proof watertight containers, 48 to a pound tin, there is enough in each tin to supply every man with 14 ounces. Together with pemmican (a concentrated mixture of beef extract, malted-milk tablets and chocolate), the shipwrecked sailor is now provided with "minimum" rations which are not only more varied and tasty than the old biscuits and condensed milk, but have a much more important, the space saved can be used for carrying water, the ration of which is now three times as great as it was.

These biscuits are made not only by Britain's table biscuit makers, but by people who normally turn out thousands of tons of dog biscuits and who have adapted their war production in this way in these wars, the South African, the 1914-1918 and the present. In the last European War one firm alone made a grand total of 1,356,976,708 biscuits for the armed forces, enough to go three times round the globe.

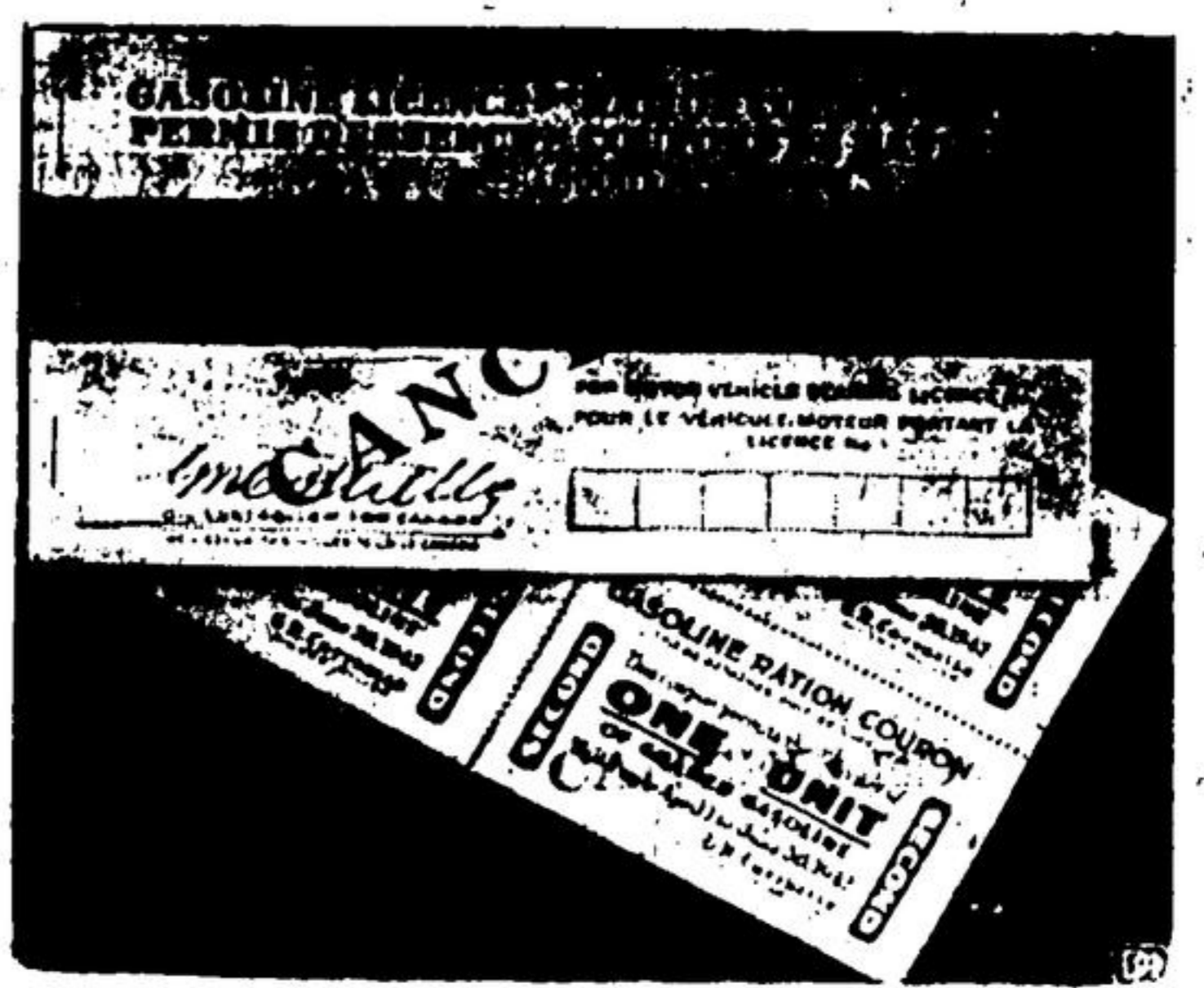
Today, they and the other concerns of Great Britain are making biscuits for the fighting forces as well as for the Merchant Navy. The Army likes its biscuits in oblongs, rather than squares, and packed in grease-proof paper. The Royal Navy, on the other hand, prefers its own cabin biscuits.

## B. C. To The Rescue

Mercury is a liquid metal, incidentally the heaviest liquid known. According to Dr. V. B. Mason of the Royal Ontario Museum it is the chief constituent in cinnabar, a mineral as red as a miller's rump.

In past years most of Canada's supply of cinnabar came from Spain. Now, this source is virtually cut off just when our demand for mercury is greatest. The demand is not because we need more thermometers or mirrors. We need mercury for the manufacture of explosives.

Mercury combines with other metals, such as silver, gold, and tin in one of its chemical compounds, it becomes an explosive of terrific force. Very recently a deposit of cinnabar was discovered in British Columbia representative samples of which are on display in the Royal Ontario Museum.



"Fill her up" will become an unfamiliar phrase on gasoline rationing gas into effect in Canada on April first. For each coupon the service station attendant detaches from your book, check how far you will deliver one unit of gasoline. If you want only half a unit the retailer can issue a coupon along a perforated line. When the plan was first announced it was thought a coupon would be for five gallons, but the shortage is becoming more acute and to one can predict how much it will represent.

## Don't Let Your Liver Make You an Invalid

People who are of colour say they're liverish or their liver is bad. Do you know how serious this is—that it may lead to permanent ill health? Your liver is the largest organ in your body and most important to your health. It supplies energy to muscles, tissues and glands. If unhealthy, your body lacks this energy and becomes enfeebled—youthful vim disappears. Again your liver purifies our bile to digest food, get rid of waste and allow proper nourishment to reach your blood. When your liver gets out of order proper digestion and nourishment stop, your body is poisoned with the waste that decomposes in your intestines. Nervous troubles and rheumatic pains arise from this poison. You become constipated, stomach and kidneys can't work properly. The whole system is affected and you feel "rotten," headache, backache, dizziness, tired out—a ready prey for sickness and disease.

Thousands of people are never sick, and have won prompt relief from these miseries with "Improved Fruit-Actives Liver Tablets." The liver is toned up, the other organs function normally and lasting good health results. Today "Improved Fruit-Actives" are Canada's largest selling liver tablets. They must be good! Try them yourself! NOW! Let "Improved Fruit-Actives" put you back on the road to lasting health—feel like a new person. 25c, 50c.

**Avoid Waste — Save Salvage!**



If every one of Canada's new army of wage-earners saves more, the country's effort toward winning the war will be greatly helped. Every dollar you save means more labour and materials freed for making the war goods so urgently needed. These savings, lent to the country in the purchase of War Savings Certificates or Victory Loan Bonds—lent to intensify Canada's war effort—will bring victory—and peace—nearer.

To Save is Practical Patriotism  
THE CHARTERED BANKS OF CANADA